

Response to 'Appealing to Scripture, Moral Formation, and Re-imagining Homosexuality', by Geoff Thompson

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In his paper,¹ Dr. Geoff Thompson argues that a deeper, more 'allusive' theological reading of Scripture enables us to 're-imagine homosexuality' in a positive light. The attempt to navigate a safe passage between the Scylla of received doctrine and the Charybdis of liberal freedom is commendable, but founders on Gnostic speculation.

Thompson begins by noting that appeals to Scripture do not solve controversial issues of sexual ethics. Scholars on both sides of the argument are serious about Scripture, and name calling and proof texting do not encourage genuine debate. He argues that we must examine the integrity of Scripture as a whole, the ways in which it shapes moral behaviour and personal factors that shape our interpretation of it, if we are to move beyond sterile characterisations of opponents as either relativists or fundamentalists.

Dismissing common liberal appeals to 'inclusion', 'freedom' and 'rights' as insufficiently grounded in firm theological soil, Thompson rightly insists that 'the results of any exegetical exercise must be brought into wider Christian considerations about God, salvation, and human existence'.² The issue, then, is how we are to understand the theological-doctrinal framework within which particular texts are set, so that our ethical decisions are congruent with Scripture as a whole.

Using Richard B. Hays³ and Luke Timothy Johnson⁴ as foils to his approach, Thompson focuses on Acts 10-15. Appealing to the analogy between acceptance of Gentiles in the early church and acceptance of homosexuals in the contemporary church is not new. Unlike Johnson, however, Thompson doesn't argue from the experience of Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit and the changed mindset of Jewish Christians. But nor does he, unlike Hays, accept that homosexuality cannot be the fulfilment of God's design for human sexuality as revealed elsewhere in Scripture.

His attempt to steer between those who privilege Word over Experience and vice versa is admirable. Less so is his endorsement of the analogy between Gentiles and homosexuals. The fact that his aim is to 're-imagine homosexuality' shows that the game is up. In post-modernity, imagination has become a surrogate for receiving the Spirit, whether it be the Spirit who inspires insight and empathy or the Spirit who elicits flights of fancy bearing little resemblance to reality.⁵ Re-imagining what was once thought to be solid and true is a big step along the path to a Gnostic reading of the body.⁶

First, Thompson claims that the inclusion of the Gentiles in Acts 10-15 not only continues the 'creative patterns of engagement with the Old Testament' practised by the early church, but is, arguably, one of the most

'creative interpretations'.⁷ Citing the use of Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15, he makes the point that, with the coming of Christ, New Testament evangelists used Old Testament passages in ways that were not true to their precise theological meaning and historical context. This is hardly new. But it is false to argue that the experience of holy Gentiles in the church, whom Jewish Christians had previously thought 'unclean', was a new work of the Spirit that expanded their understanding of the 'wider narrative' of inclusion in Christ. The 'striking extrapolation of Jesus' promise'⁸ to include 'the nations' certainly is a work of the Holy Spirit, as is the inclusion of the barbarians and Scythians.⁹ But in view of Scripture's harsh assessment of pagan and Gentile misbehaviour in general, and their sexual practices in particular,¹⁰ grounds for the inclusion of homosexuality are spurious, particularly as Jesus Christ himself re-affirmed God's design for sexual relations as marriage between a man and a woman (Matt 19:5).

Second, Thompson claims that homosexuality is an integral part of 'creation's inscrutability', that is, 'the knowledge of the goodness of creation and its very createdness is not exhausted by a knowledge of those of its features which are deemed obvious and/or ordered'.¹¹ It is surprising, and too clever by half, that he supports this claim by invoking passages in Job and Ecclesiastes that speak of 'God's freedom from all creaturely expectations' and 'perceptions of order'.¹² He overlooks the fact that, in Genesis 1:24-25, 'living creatures of every kind' are already included in God's 'good creation'. That the 'universe has wrinkles' that signify God's 'inscrutable creative wisdom' is not necessarily evidence that the experience of committed homosexual Christian couples is congruent with God's 'good creation' as revealed in the comprehensive narrative of Scripture. Indeed, it is unclear why committed gay and lesbian sexual relationships are prioritised over other consensual sexual relations that are bi-sexual, transgendered, polyamorous, polygamous, incestuous etc. On Thompson's grounds, it is impossible to determine which relations are part of the 'integrity of God's good creation' and which are not.

Presumably, those who reject the binary nature of sex and its 'toxic hetero-normative restraint' on multifarious forms of gender can also claim to be part of God's hidden creative wisdom. While Thompson recognises that the issue extends to the 'diversity of sexualities' represented in the LGBTI acronym,¹³ he needs to explain whether his analysis would extend to this far more radical social agenda, and, if not, why not.

If it does, then he is committed to saying that God's 'good creation' incorporates non-binary sexual relations that are clearly forbidden according to the clear testimony

of Scripture from beginning to end. If he does not support an aggressive political agenda that is committed to imposing non-binary Gender Theory on the public, then his Gnostic doctrine of creation must be re-thought.

Once the 'inscrutability of God's hidden creation' is advanced to endorse relations which, no matter how sincere, are not permitted by God's clear revelation in nature and Scripture, the way is open to endorse other relationships currently hidden from us in the wisdom of God. Arguments from silence are unconvincing, particularly when they support novelties that are incompatible with what has been spoken.

Third, care is needed to distinguish between different concepts of 'nature'. Thompson argues that, in Romans 1:26-27, Paul's argument 'has not been to condemn Gentiles, but to argue to Jews that they shared in the disordered creation'.¹⁴ This now typical move in church circles is plainly false. Homosexual behaviour by Gentiles is so serious that it is used as the primary, but not only, form of idolatry against the Creator. It isn't simply a means to goad Jewish opponents. The point is that the Jews' stubbornness, with which Paul was personally acquainted, is as idolatrous as homosexuality.

Both dishonour God by acting contrary to God's 'good creation', that is, against our natural purpose of worshipping God and enjoying him forever. When, as Thompson notes, Paul later refers to Gentiles being included in the church 'contrary to nature',¹⁵ this does not indicate, as Thompson claims, that Paul's use of 'nature' is 'unstable'. And so this claimed instability of the use of 'nature' cannot be used to justify a Gentile practice that Paul, in keeping with the consistent testimony of Scripture, clearly regards as 'unnatural'. He is simply using a horticultural image to speak of the miracle of grace that has bridged the chasm that, until the coming of Christ, had existed between Jewish and Hellenistic religion and culture.¹⁶

Fourth, the sections on desire and the psychosomatic nature of persons reveal Thompson's thoroughly Gnostic approach to sex. He asks: do the Genesis texts 'require the theological judgment that anatomy and desire are necessarily linked? Are they open to the possibility that the union spoken of here admits only one combination of anatomy and desire?'¹⁷ Countering those who ground sexuality solely in anatomy, he argues that 'There are good theological reasons to point instead to a unity of the whole person which can make anatomy and psychology together serve the integrated person that any individual is'.¹⁸ The forms of that unity vary within the 'differentiated integrity of God's wise creation'.¹⁹ Thus, desire may take place in marriage which 'in some sense is paradigmatic rather than prescriptive'.²⁰ He argues that, because Jesus', Paul's and Revelation's eschatological relativising of marriage and the family and the legitimising of celibacy break the nexus between sexual intercourse and procreation, the satisfaction of sexual desire is 'a good in itself'.²¹ Thus, our bodily desires are 'reconfigured and invested with new meaning when subordinated to the desire for God'.²² All well and good, except that he ignores the clear witness of Scripture to the twofold form in which desire is sanctioned for disciples of the kingdom of God: marriage between a man and a woman; and celibacy. The relativising of marriage and family does not thereby legitimise or justify the claim that Christians in homosexual partnerships 'break the nexus between conventional sexuality and the signs of discipleship'.²³

Incredibly, he ignores the fact that, in Scripture, 'sexual orientations', like all desires, need to be disciplined. As many same-sex attracted people attest, 'orientation' does not necessarily entail 'practice'.²⁴ It is a pity that he ignores the experience of many Christians who have sought and found liberation from unwanted same-sex attraction. The claim that Scripture 'construct(s) a vision of creation and human life that allows homosexuality to be considered a good of creation and to consist of desires, like other desires, which can be faithfully oriented towards God',²⁵ can only be made on Gnostic grounds that find hidden meaning at odds with Scripture's 'larger narrative'. The eschatological framework within which our bodily life takes place does not sanction sexual relations that deny its clear testimony to our complementary creation as male and female.

Thompson's failure to give an account of the bodily nature of homosexual intimacy, including the complex biological, psychological, sociological and ideological causes of same-sex attraction, severely weakens his argument, as does the absence of discussion about the intimacy involved in friendship and celibacy. If, as he says in the final footnote,²⁶ his argument can also be made of the witness of celibate Christians, he will have to show why non-celibate homosexual relations are part of God's good creation.

At least the case for Christian friendship and celibacy will not depend on a Gnostic approach to Scripture that finds hidden meanings that contradict its clear mandate for sexual relations.

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Endnotes

1. 'Appealing to Scripture, Moral Formation, and Re-imagining Homosexuality', *Zadok Paper S211*, Summer (2015).
2. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 3.
3. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).
4. *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).
5. See Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 101-105.
6. Thompson may not want to draw the same conclusions as those who attended the 1993 women's conference on 'RE-imagining the Divine' sponsored by the World Council of Churches. If so he will have to show how he intends to avoid its Gnosticism. See, for e.g., C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson, eds, *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism* (London: Eerdmans, 1995).
7. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 7.
8. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 7.
9. Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28 shake up social conformity without including behaviours considered immoral.
10. E.g. Mark 10:42; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:16-21.
11. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 8.
12. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 8 and 9. He refers to Job 39:13-18; 26-30 and Ecclesiastes 1:15-17; 2:17-13; 8:14; 12:1-8.
13. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 14, n. 2.
14. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 10.
15. Romans 11:24.
16. For extended discussion of the natural and the unnatural, see M. Champion, 'Nihilism and Nature: Bonhoeffer's "Theology of the Body" and the Homosexuality Debate', in *Bonhoeffer Down Under* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2012), 105-126.
17. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 11.
18. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 11.
19. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 11.
20. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 12.
21. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 12.
22. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 13.
23. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 12.
24. See, for e.g., W. Hill, 'Christ, Scripture, and Spiritual Friendship', in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 124-147.
25. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 12.
26. Thompson, 'Appealing to Scripture', 14.